

What our negative comments and consumer gripes on social media reveal about us

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Credit: Cup of Couple from Pexels

A supermarket starts [stocking hot-cross buns](#) straight after Christmas. A [cling-wrap brand](#) shifts its serrated cutter bar from the base of the box to inside the lid. The maker of M&M's chocolates changes its marketing.

Each time people take to social media [to complain](#).

Why do people get so angry about things that seem so trivial?

We've examined the issue of consumer anger on social media because, as marketing academics, we're interested in how companies handle the excessive toxicity that comes with corporate social media engagement. But our research also helps explain the causes of this culture of complaint.

Our findings point to this behaviour meeting two [basic psychological needs](#).

First, complaining is a mechanism for social connection.

Second, it's an opportunity to boost self-esteem through what psychologists call "[downward social comparison](#)". Given social media feeds can be rife with opportunities to feel inferior, complaining about brands is an easy way to feel better about ourselves.

How we did our research

To figure out why people complain so much on social media, we analysed [negative posts](#) on Facebook about brands caught up in media controversies at the time.

We focused on six companies—a clothing [brand](#), a supermarket, an airline, an e-commerce store, a department store and a beverage company.

Each had a Facebook page with more than 1 million followers. The controversies included alleged employee mistreatment, unethical business practices, bad customer experiences and a poorly received

advertising campaign. We analysed hundreds of comments posted on these companies' pages. We followed up with interviews with 13 [social media users](#) who said they used Facebook at least daily and interacted with brands on social media at least weekly.

We asked these 13 people what they posted about and their reasons for posting. We also asked them to speculate about other [social media posts](#) regarding the same brands. This enabled us to draw our conclusions.

Complaining to bond with others

The most common reason for complaining online was paying for something that didn't arrive or failed to work in some way. This was our least surprising finding.

More surprising was how many who joined in posting [negative comments](#), without any firsthand experience. We saw this complaining used as a bonding mechanism, with users tagging family or friends in posts about malfunctioning equipment with questions such as: "Has this happened with yours?"

Complaining has long been "a pervasive and important form of social communication", as psychology professor Mark Alicke and colleagues noted in [a 1992 study](#), published before most people had even heard of the internet.

Social media has amplified this, enabling us to not only complain to friends but also to create a type of [social connection](#) with strangers. We could give you dozens of examples from our research, but you can probably think of many from your own experiences.

The people we studied got a kick out of debating strangers, particularly when they felt they had the upper hand. One interviewee told us: "I kind

of like it, because it shows that at least I'm having an impact. If I'm talking about something someone's so angry about that they write something back, at least we're having a conversation."

Such responses speak the social dilemma of social networks. Our increasingly digital existence contributes to real-world social disconnection. To compensate, people look for whatever attention they can find on social media, including through complaining and arguing.

Downward social comparison

The second major psychological reward from complaining on social media was to boost their self-esteem. As one participant told us: "This is kind of that negative thing, but it's more in a funny, sarcastic, trolling negative thing."

This pay-off came through strongly when we asked our interviewees to speculate on others' complaints. "Maybe they're bored and lonely at home," said one. "The fact he's obviously looking down on the people is elevating his position," said another.

Boosting self-esteem by looking down others is known as "[downward social comparison](#)". This idea was articulated by American social psychologist [Leon Festinger in 1954](#), who suggested humans were hardwired by evolution to compare our value against others.

Generally we seek comparisons with people like ourselves. Upward social comparisons (to higher-status individuals or groups) is bad for our self-esteem, while downward comparison (to lower-status targets) can boost our [self-esteem](#).

Research over the past decade or so suggest amplifies our need to find things to feel superior about precisely because it is so effective in

making us feel inferior, with [social media feeds](#) typically subjecting us to "[highlight reels](#)" of other people's beachside holidays, job promotions, romantic dinners and so on.

[One study](#), for example, has found that spending more time on social media is associated with a greater likelihood of thinking others are happier and have better lives.

Looking down on companies and brands may be an easy, relatively socially acceptable way for us to feel smarter and superior.

Manipulating our love of complaining

Some complaining is a good thing. It shows companies we are ready to hold them to account.

But the degree to which complaining is done to scratch psychological itches is complicating the use of social media. Indeed, some companies now deliberately court controversy to exploit our love for complaining.

An example is British breakfast cereal maker Weetabix, which in February 2021 tweeted an image of Weetabix topped with baked beans. This is hardly an important issue. But it generated enough controversy on [social media](#) to also spill over into dozen of reports on legacy [media](#).

Whenever you see a brand bringing out some odd flavour, it's probably not because company executives have lost their minds. It's more likely their marketing experts are deliberately looking to provoke people to express mirth or disgust about it.

So if you find yourself engaging in online complaining, be mindful of the social and psychological factors lurking below the surface.

Just as you may be taking advantage of a brand to make yourself feel better, it is possible a company is stoking controversy to take advantage of you.

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